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Of Names

I go by my middle name. Consequently, I spent the first day of each class throughout my academic life timidly interrupting the rapid-fire of name listing to say that *I actually go by a completely different name than the one on your roster, which is actually my middle name, which, yes, I'm sorry, is very confusing, and no, I can't explain to you why my parents made that decision*, all the while silently willing them to just write it down and move on already.

I find that most people assume I had much more control over the naming process than I did. “Why do you go by your middle name?” they ask. “Don’t you like your first name?” As though I rejected that name out of pretention or an unwillingness to conform. I usually need to exercise some self-control at this point. I want to ask them if their parents consulted them about their names. If their father pressed the whorls of his ear flush against their mother’s stomach, listening for strains of assent from the fetus floating around in her fluid, fingers still joined by webbing.

Naming, for most parents, is not a democratic process. Though in my parents’ case, it wasn’t a strictly bilateral decision either. For the first year of my life, my parents flip-flopped on

what to call me. I was mostly referred to simply as “baby” or “the original baby,” if one were feeling grandiose. The confusion stemmed from blessings: the giver of my blessings, my dad or my grandpa, would begin calling me by my first name but would unconsciously revert to my middle for the rest of the blessing. My parents had every intention of calling me by my given name at my birth, but after this continued manifestation of preference from on high, they reluctantly exited the name limbo of calling me baby.

Fifteen years later, on the occasion of my patriarchal blessing, the patriarch took great pains in explaining that he would address me by my first name throughout. He spent several minutes discussing with great sensitivity and tenderness (unnecessary, as I didn’t care either way) his reasons for doing so. My name is used a total of eleven times in my blessing. The first use is *Lauren Eliza Broadbent*, the second is *Lauren*, and the remaining nine uses are *Eliza*.

Six years after this event, I asked my dad what he remembered from my patriarchal blessing (he having *not* set eyes on it again in the intervening years). He replied that what stuck with him and my mom was how the patriarch made such a point of telling us he would use my first name and then used my middle every time. “That was our plan too, buddy,” he concluded dryly.

The odd thing is that I’ve never been particular about my name. I once had someone ask me which of the two common ways I preferred my name to be pronounced. That was a few years ago, and I had honestly never considered it; I didn’t care at all. I often don’t correct people when they use my first name. In high school, I went all four years without telling my counselor that I went by my middle name—I figured if I only saw him a handful of times each year it wasn’t worth the effort.

With this relative apathy in place from infancy, it is strange to think that God was so opinionated about my name, that He

has chosen what to call me from the moment I was a squealing infant in white wriggling under hands joined on my head. (A statement that feels unbearably pretentious as I write it on this page.)

I am left to wonder what importance names hold. How can something we have so little control over shape us in a significant way? Are all names important? What about spelling? For example, is there a difference between Emmillee or Emmalee or Emily? What about those with particularly distinctive names? What about the Candys, Apples, and Joaquins of the world? Can names mold us, shape who we will become in an essential way? Or are they just a calling card, a word used to get our attention or identify us on public documents?

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Famed Spanish painter Salvador Dalí shared his name with his older brother, who died nine months before his birth. At the age of five, his parents took him to his brother's grave and explained to him that he was the reincarnation of his brother. Dalí accepted this concept and would later comment that his brother "was probably a first version of myself but conceived too much in the absolute" (Dalí 2).

It must have been difficult to grow up within the confines of another's name. To be reminded every time he was called to wash up for dinner or scolded for some small transgression that he was the sequel to a life started and paused almost at the moment of his own conception. To write, in a clumsy, childish scrawl, that name on the top of every multiplication table and spelling test. He had to inscribe it, first in a looping script and later in geometric spikes, on over 1,500 paintings. I wonder if he felt that long-ago memory of visiting his brother's grave press up against his mind with each signature. If each time he signed a painting, he thought of a former blueprint of himself

lying under the earth, reduced to bones and scraps of fine cloth. Perhaps his proliferate production of art was in some ways a reaction to the imposed sharing of his name between two lives. His utterly unique style a way to push back against the fact that each one-of-a-kind piece bore the signature of two. Of his brother, Dalí stated: “[we] resembled each other like two drops of water, but we had different reflections” (2).

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Most of us are familiar with the concept of genes. Genes are commonly referred to as the “code” that determines our development and is present in every cell of our bodies. Our genetic code serves as a script for the creation of proteins that allow our cells to function properly. But not every gene is used to make proteins (i.e., expressed) with equal frequency. For example, a stomach cell will need different amounts and types of proteins than a muscle cell. Differences in gene expression also account for differences between species, which is why humans look very different from cats despite the fact that 90% of our genetic code is identical. It also explains why there is an incredible diversity in human beings even though we are 99.9% genetically identical to each other. Basically, there are things beyond our innate genes that determine who we become.

Which brings me to the role of names. Each of us come into the world with a set of talents and abilities, a sort of “personality code” akin to our “genetic code.” Maybe our names serve as an overlay to this code, helping to express certain characteristics and not express others. In the case of Salvador Dalí, I wonder if his name served to overlay inherent qualities of creativity and appreciation of the strange, kicking their expression into overdrive. Or if my name caused me to develop into a different person than I would have if I had gone by my first name. As a believer in God’s efficiency, it is compelling to

think that He would use an analog of the elegant mechanism that differentiates a cat structurally from a human to provide a sort of differentiating spiritual framework.

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God has a history of giving names and changing names. One of the best examples of this is seen in Abraham's immediate family. Abraham was first known as Abram. As Abram, he traveled away from his family and everything he had ever known to follow God's divine call. He was Abram as he sojourned in Egypt; triumphantly rescued his brother Lot; was blessed by King Melchizedek, High Priest of God; and had a son, named Ishmael, by Hagar. Only after these events did the Lord change his name, commanding him, "Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee" (Gen. 17.5).

In one breath, God changes his name from Abram, meaning "exalted father," to Abraham, meaning "father of a multitude." The change is primarily in degree of magnitude. Both emphasize Abraham's central role as a father. But *Abram* gives no sense of scale, while *Abraham* conveys an immense posterity. This renaming must have struck Abraham to the core. I imagine he had become resigned to his fate. Resigned to the fact that he would have only one son and none by his beloved Sarai. He must have felt the press of his name—exalted father—as he and Sarai knelt across from each other to plea for children, their clasped hands first smooth and firm but ever more wrinkled as decades passed. I imagine how their whispered pleas sounded. Some days rough and choking, expelled forcefully from Abram's chest in his abundance of emotion. And other times worn smooth from their repeated passage through barely parted lips.

His name must have seemed to mock him. Every time he was called, cajoled, commanded, he, the man with a barren

wife, was called father. I wonder if Sarai thought of his name to steel herself when she told him to go to Hagar. Maybe she repeated that name again and again in her mind as Hagar's belly grew round and swollen like ripe fruit, taunting herself with her own inadequacy.

Sarai also gets a new name in this story. In the same revelation, God tells Abraham, "As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. . . . I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her" (Gen. 17.15–16).

We know that Abraham laughed at this point in the conversation. We don't know how he laughed. I doubt it was a deep, boisterous belly-laugh. It could have been a mirthless laughter, dry and without body, toneless, defeated. Alternatively, it might have been the slightly hysterical laugh that we expel when our only other option is to cry, when we reach our tipping point and waver back and forth above desperation.

If I had to choose one, I would say the latter.

We know that Abraham questioned within himself, "Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?" (Gen. 17.17).

Interestingly enough, Sarai is likely another term for Sarah, meaning princess. This begs the question: Why did God care enough to make this minor name shift? It's a mere letter substitution, a slight syllable change. I like to think that in giving her a new name, God was trying to shift Sarah's view of herself. He was telling her that though barren she was always, within, a mother of nations, just as Abraham through long years without children was a father. In giving them new names, God was pushing them forward to express what was always within them but buried deep, denied in the face of ever-growing doubt and hopelessness. Showing them that their names always indicated their purpose, even when they rang like taunts in their ears. In giving them new names so similar in meaning to their first,

God was affirming and expanding their potential, as well as recommitting them to their names.

God gives one more name in this revelation. He tells the newly christened Abraham and Sarah what they will name their son, “thou shalt call his name Isaac” (Gen. 17.19). Isaac means “he laugheth.” I believe that God understood Abraham’s earlier laughter. That He heard in it not only notes of mockery but the strain of a man struggling against the expectations of his name. He understood the heartache of a man who watched the most righteous of dreams recede until he could barely remember the hope that once resided in his chest, so bright he was almost surprised it didn’t shine through his sternum in a buttery, yellow glow.

Now God was promising them a son. And upon this blessing He added one more: Abraham and Sarah would have laughter again. Laughter without artifice, force, or effort. After decades of barrenness, there would be a son, and with that son, laughter.

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When your name is somewhat unique, those you meet often like to play association games. “Oh,” they say, “like [fill in the blank].” The underlying assumption seems to be that because you share the same name as a certain actress, book character, or historical figure, you bear some connection. You’re expected to make some witty comment, insular reference, or at the very least nod obligingly. This sort of nonsense is not required of the Johns or Maddies or Bills or Jennifers of the world. I have yet to hear some jocular individual, upon meeting a man named John, exclaim “John, you say, like John Wayne!” or “Like John the Baptist?”

I have been tied to many similarly named people in my life. A historical woman who was famously cheated on. A children’s song protagonist with questionable problem-solving

skills. A TV show character with buckteeth and coke-bottle glasses. A book character who's an ugly duckling with a cockney accent (my least favorite reference, as it often involves the attempting of said accent). Each time, my internal connection to these referenced individuals has been unwittingly strengthened, in a strange linkage whereby we have both nothing and something fundamental in common.

On my bookshelf, I have several biographies of Eliza R. Snow, who shares my name. My parents gifted them to me on miscellaneous holidays, and I promptly deposited them in my closet to collect dust. As a teenager, I couldn't understand my parents' attempt at forcing unity between the two of us. They seemed to expect that because we shared a name I would instinctively feel some deep-rooted connection across the gulf of time and experience that separated us. Occasionally I would glance up from hanging up a shirt and lock eyes with a picture of her on the cover of one of the books. The image was in black-and-white, which served only to enhance its already considerable severity. The starched collar of her shirt grazed her set chin, and her mass of black hair was tightly coiled at the top of her head. The skin around her eyes was soft and drooping, accentuating the hardness in her black pupils. She had a face that could appropriately be set above dueling pistols.

As a timid pre-teen then teenager then young adult, I felt mismatched. On one hand, there is the stalwart pioneer with iron in her eyes. On the other, there is me. The quiet homebody who would rather curl up by the window with a stack of books than face the world. The sharing of a name seemed a tenuous connection at best.

Yet the connection continues to sneak up on me. A few years ago, while researching family history, my dad stumbled upon my many-greats grandfather Joseph Hancey. Joseph Hancey was the hero of the small Utah town of Hyde Park. He was the resident town doctor, dentist, carpenter, mortician, and

inventor. A tribute provided in the Logan Journal in April 1933 (on the occasion of his death) said of him, "It is such men as he, that makes the building of substantial communities in the desert possible. . . . Always optimistic, always encouraging some crest-fallen soul who found it hard to stand up under the rebuffs of an unkind fate, he was a priceless treasure to any community. He was her best citizen" ("James Hancey").

Hancey practiced polygamy and had three wives, the second being my many-greats grandmother. In the later years of his life, polygamy was made illegal, and Hancey experienced a period of intense trial as a result, with his wives forced to move into hiding in different states. It was during this time of struggle, in the spring of 1888, that he learned that a church meeting in Hyde Park would be led by no other than Eliza R. Snow. Hancey was laid up with pneumonia at the time but was so anxious to attend that his friends helped him to the church. In that meeting, Hancey experienced one of the great miracles of his life. During her talk, Eliza singled Hancey out of the congregation and spoke in tongues to him. Hancey would later report that she drew from the hymn "Peace, Troubled Soul." This was a turning point for Hancey. He soon regained his health and his wives and family were able to return to Hyde Park.

This ancestral connection, when I learned of it, seemed to finally bridge the gap of time and experience between me and my namesake. On the face, nothing was changed. This happened to a generations-distant, if direct, relative over a century before I took my first breath. My parents had mentioned and associated me with pioneer Eliza for my entire life. But tying her to someone whose blood, albeit diluted, runs through my veins and whose genetic information lies in each of my cells, made this nebulous connection established through sharing a name begin to coalesce; it caused a shift in me. I am left hoping that within me lies a measure of my namesake's grit, poetic talent, and unwavering faith. That there is some truth

in Dalí's statement about raindrops and that, despite vastly different source material, I may become like her as one drop to another, reflecting different centuries.

There is a principle in psychology called sensory adaptation. Defined simply, sensory adaptation happens when we start to ignore things that we are constantly exposed to. An example of this is how we stop consciously noticing the sensation of our clothes on our skin. Another example of this is names. We use names every day. They are simultaneously a core part of how we define ourselves and something we never think about. Like the old elastic waistband of our favorite pair of sweats, they are integral and yet so comfortable we forget they're there.

Until, that is, we have some new stimuli that comes along and takes us out of adaptation mode and causes us to see our names as though for the first time. After I received my patriarchal blessing, I went home and looked up the meaning of my name. I wanted to know why God had rejected one perfectly good name in favor of another. As I scrolled through the listings, one entry caught my eye. It was the Hebrew root of my name: "Eliza: Consecrated to God" ("Meaning").

Works Cited

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